



Scriptotherapy as Resistance: Tracing Generational Trauma in Hala Alyan's Salt Houses

Hunufa Nasir

Master of Arts (English), Department of Languages, Integral University, Lucknow, India

Received: 06 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 02 Sep 2025; Accepted: 05 Sep 2025; Available online: 10 Sep 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *The Israel-Palestine conflict emerges as one of the long-lasting and most divisive wars of the contemporary age, which is defined by continuing cycles of bloodshed, territorial disputes, and ingrained historical grudges. Amidst this intricate terrain, the Palestine resistance movement has surfaced as a pivotal agent championing equity, autonomy, and release for the Palestinian people. This study examines scriptotherapy as a form of resistance by analyzing Hala Alyan's Salt Houses in depth, tracking the deep patterns of intergenerational trauma and evaluating how writing becomes a location for negotiating identity and sustaining the Palestinian narrative. Moreover, the text provides a comprehensive overview of the state of Palestinian literature after the Al-Nakba conflict and the emergence of novel memoirs that became recognized as life stories. The study promotes a greater awareness of the human cost of the conflict and the aspirations for dignity and self-determination that drive the Palestinian struggle by elevating Palestinian voices and experiences.*



Keywords— *Displacement, Exile, Palestine, Resistance, Trauma*

I. INTRODUCTION

The protracted pain that inflicted upon Palestinians have caused a rupture within their collective memory—which simultaneously serves as a reminder of resistance and as a constant fight for their rights against colonial domination. The Israel-Palestine conflict is an enduring example of religious and ethnonationalist conflicts, demonstrating how the violent ‘othering’ of Jewish communities in Europe greatly exacerbated the unrest in the Middle East. Its origins can be seen in Mandatory Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Zionism and Arab nationalism, two rival nationalist organizations, arose under British rule. Despite having a strong desire for political power, cultural acceptance, and sovereign dominance over the area, both movements saw the other as a barrier to their goals. The idea of creating a haven for Jews was inextricably linked to Zionist leaders’ conviction that the Holy Land was their legitimate heritage (Pal, 2021, p. 48). Underlying the Palestinian Israeli conflict is a significant paradox: the state of Israel was established as a haven for the Jewish diaspora, but the diasporization and mass displacement of the

Palestinian Arab people was a direct consequence of its creation. After centuries of persecution, the Jewish people sought a homeland, which paradoxically led to another people experiencing the same statelessness and exile. As a result of displacement and forced migration, Palestinians became the epitome of a refugee country (Anvekar, 2024, p. 907). Al-Nakba, the tragedy that represents not only the loss of territory but also the suffering of exile, fragmentation, and the systematic denial of identity and home, is emblematic of the rise of Israel in Palestinian remembrance.

An Arab American writer Hala Alyan who was born in the United States to a Palestinian father and Lebanese mother experienced multiple displacements in her early childhood, moving across Palestine, Kuwait, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates before ultimately resettling in America. The tragic trauma of constant displacements is evident in her debut novel Salt Houses. Alyan carefully crafts an expansive story that delineates the persistent dislocation of the Yacoub family during decades of political turmoil and conflict.

In Greek, the term trauma initially signifies a bodily harm, but in psychological contexts, it refers to a mental injury (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). The Nablus family home serves as the focal point of Alyan's *Salt Houses*. Salma sits in the yard in silence on the eve of Alia's wedding, thinking about her own history while also contemplating her granddaughter's future. Her mind returns to Jaffa, to the hilltop home with its expansive Mediterranean view and its thriving orange orchards—a location that, before being lost to exile, represented security and a sense of belonging. In contrast, the Nablus home stands as both a reconstruction and a reminder of loss, for in its Salma dreams of returning to Jaffa, to “everything as she'd left it” (Alyan, 2017, p. 6). When the Yacoub family relocates from Jaffa to Nablus, they are left devastated, mourning the irretrievable loss of their cherished home in Jaffa. For Salma's husband, Hussam, this displacement is particularly unbearable, as his attachment to the house was profound. His anguish is captured in the lines: “More than once he cried out in the night, ‘they took my home, they took my lungs. Kill me, kill me.’ Hussam fiercely believed his illness was tied to occupation of Jaffa, the city with the peach-colored house they'd left behind” (Alyan, 2017, p. 3). This passage underscores the inseparable link Hussam perceives between personal well-being and the loss of homeland, illustrating how dispossession becomes both a physical and psychological affliction.

II. INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND THE INHERITANCE OF DISPLACEMENT

Given the ongoing and unrelenting nature of traumatic experience, Jabr contends that the idea of “post-traumatic stress disorder” is inappropriate for the Palestinian context (Jabr, 2019, p. 6). According to this observation, trauma is a chronic condition that becomes ingrained in the basic framework of Palestinian life rather than being a temporary effect of displacement. The suffering caused by leaving one's home doesn't only occur once in history; it recurs throughout generations, influencing identities, memories, and even physical health. In the novel, the forced removal from Jaffa in Hussam's instance shows up as both physical sickness and emotional sorrow, illustrating how the loss of one's hometown is internalized as an unhealing wound. Trauma thus becomes an unavoidable aspect of the Palestinian experience, embedded into everyday existence and perpetuated as a collective legacy of suffering and resiliency.

As Alyan's narrative demonstrates, the weight of exile is not only recalled but actively experienced, influencing the identities and decisions of future generations. This continuum places the grandmother at the center, serving as

a symbolic steward of cultural memory in addition to being an elder in the family. In their most personal form, grandmothers represent the motherland as a source of rootedness, tradition, and belonging. Their memories and voices heal historical wounds, guaranteeing that the past is not forgotten but rather strengthened.

Linah's and other characters' representations of the Palestinian experience in the narrative provide a striking example of how the persistent burden of trauma passed down through the generations may give rise to defiance and perseverance. Instead of existing as a remote or resolved history, the memory of occupation, war, and relocation throbs as a present reality that demands recognition and resolution. This persistent cycle of inherited pain turns memory itself into an act of resistance, transforming individual sorrow into a social demand for justice and acknowledgment. They impart more than just anecdotes to the younger generation through their storytelling, or what Toni Morrison refers to as “remembrance,” as they pass on an innate knowledge of resilience, identity, and motherland (Morrison, February 1974). Through this process, memory becomes a tool for resistance and survival, strengthening continuity in the face of loss.

By preserving history, identity, and optimism through her cultural role, Alyan elevates the grandmother's figure above a personal one, influencing the younger generation's self-perception and continuous fight for autonomy. Bayeh asserts that *Salt Houses*' concept of return defies the appearance of nostalgia. Return turns out to be a complex undertaking, weighed down by emotional baggage and historical disruption, rather than a simple restoration of the past. As it reveals how memory and displacement converge to make the process of going back more difficult, it creates a web of inconsistencies and associations (Bayeh, 2015, p. 7).

Salt Houses stand within a broader context of postcolonial and diaspora literature, where memory serves as both a burden and a weapon, thanks to this intricate web of memory, trauma, and resistance. Reconstructing the past is only one aspect of memory; it also forces people to balance their lived reality with their inherited sorrow, which undermines their present identities. Thus, Alyan's narrative is consistent with Marianne Hirsch's theory of “post-memory”, according to which the second generation inherits not only the stories of their ancestors but also their silences, scars, and unresolved sadness (Hirsch, 2012, p. 22). The recollections of displacement are not static; rather, they function as a haunting force that shapes the way in which younger people perceive their role in society.

Furthermore, Edward Said's thoughts on exile, in which he claims that displacement involves not only physical

separation but also a persistent condition of “in-betweenness,” are further supported by Alyan’s portrayal of memory (Said, 2000, p. 173). Characters in *Salt Houses* inhabit regions of transition—between memory and erasure, country and diaspora, past and present. This liminality serves as an example of how exile is a continuous state rather than a one-time occurrence. Alyan’s focus on memory as a source of identity and a location of unresolved trauma encapsulates the dichotomy of diasporic subjectivity: the need to flee and keep the burden of inherited loss at the same time.

III. RESISTANCE THROUGH WRITING: SCRIPTOTHERAPY AS SURVIVAL

The act of writing, particularly in settings of dispossession, exile, and displacement, goes beyond simple narration. It develops into a profound type of resistance, survival, and healing. Suzette Henke defined scriptotherapy as the therapeutic process in which traumatized individuals and groups participate in writing or textual production to process experiences of loss, sorrow, and rupture. “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (Henke, 1998). Writing serves not just as a tool for self-expression in the Palestinian context, where trauma is collective and intergenerational, but also as a means of preserving memory against erasure.

Alyan’s *Salt Houses* incorporates scriptotherapy in its multigenerational narrative, where the act of narrating becomes a therapeutic reclamation of loss and displacement. The opening of the story where Salma foresees Alia’s tough future in Nablus. This scene introduces the notion of intergenerational trauma: Salma’s fear becomes ingrained in Alia’s life, and thus in future generations. Alyan transforms private anguish into collective memory by narrating such inherited worries, which resists forgetting. Scriptotherapy serves as Alyan’s means of instilling ancestral anxiety in language. The first split occurred with the 1967 Six-Day War and the loss of the family’s Palestinian home. Alyan’s portrayal of Alia and Atef’s relocation to Kuwait depicts the confusion of exile. As the novel switches to private monologues and fractured views, storytelling mediates the trauma of losing one’s physical birthplace. These broken voices highlight the impossibility of adequately ‘telling’ trauma, but their very articulation enacts the healing process of exposing scars. Riordan defines Scriptotherapy as “the deliberate use of writing to enhance therapeutic outcomes” (Riordan, 1996). When everything else fails, writing becomes the only escape.

The exile pattern is repeated when Riham, Souad, and the extended family are forced to migrate again during the Gulf War in 1990. Souad’s defiance of cultural norms, her quest for identification in Paris, and her battle to balance her history with a modern lifestyle are all examples of scriptotherapy in action in this scene. Through recounting Souad’s dissonance, Alyan examines how trauma transforms over time, manifesting merely as displacement but also as identity crisis, cultural fragmentation, and estrangement.

Manar’s trip to Palestine and Souad’s children in the post-9/11 era mark the novel’s climax. When physical reclamation is not possible, Manar’s journey to her grandparents’ homeland serves as an example of scriptotherapy’s ultimate purpose: using narrative to return to the site of loss. Alyan stitches together shattered identities by acknowledging rather than stifling displacement, and Manar’s experience with a region marred by erasure and occupation turns into a textual healing space. By ensuring that the tale of exile does not fade into obscurity, the act of chronicling Manar’s return is inherently resistant.

Throughout these pivotal periods—the Gulf War, the Nakba, and the exile following 9/11—Alyan employs scriptotherapy by transforming past tragedies into beautiful memories. The broken voices of all individuals are incorporated into a larger story that defies erasure. The therapeutic location is *The Salt Houses* themselves, a literary masterpiece where identity, belonging, and bereavement are permanently rewritten. In this way, Alyan shows how writing becomes a form of resistance and healing for Palestinians living abroad, enabling the respectful remembrance and transmission of intergenerational wounds.

IV. CONCLUSION

Palestinian identities are shaped by intergenerational trauma, exile, and relocation, as demonstrated in *Hala Alyan’s Salt Houses*. Loss is not a solitary or historical event, but rather a continuous, live reality. Alyan illustrates through the Yacoub family how trauma endures down the generations, impacting memory and self-perception. The younger generation’s inherited fears, Hussam’s physical and mental pain, and Salma’s longing for Jaffa all serve as examples of this continuity and are consistent with Jabr’s criticism of traditional PTSD frameworks.

Additionally, the novel reflects Said’s idea of exile as a continual state of ‘in-betweenness,’ emphasizing the liminality of diasporic identity, and post memory, in which descendants internalize ancestral suffering. Alyan’s story revolves around scriptotherapy, which uses writing as a

platform for healing and resistance. By turning inherited pain into a story, Alyan shows that storytelling can be a form of cultural rebellion as well as therapy, maintaining continuity, identity, and resilience.

Salt Houses is ultimately a prime example of how literature can turn acts of resistance and survival into collective pain. Comparative studies of scriptotherapy in postcolonial and diasporic contexts, the relationship between gender and intergenerational trauma, or modern narrative practices in digital media that defy erasure and retain memory could all be topics for future research.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alyan, H. (2017). *Salt Houses*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- [2] Anvekar, D. Y. (2024). "Climax of Resistance in Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*". *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 907–913.
- [3] Bayeh, J. (2015). *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora: Representations of Place and Transnational Identity*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- [4] Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [5] Gheytsi, S. (2024 Volume 46). *Echoes of Exile: Rememory and Resistance in Salt Houses*. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 9-27.
- [6] Henke, S. A. (1998). *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-writing*. New York: St. Martin's.
- [7] Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [8] Jabr, S. (2019). *What Palestinians Experience Goes Beyond the PTSD Label*. *Middle East Eye*.
- [9] Morrison, T. (February 1974). *Behind the Making of The Black Book*. *Black World*, 89.
- [10] Pal, P. (2021). *Nostalgia, Identity, and Homeland: Reading the Narratives of the Diaspora in Susan Abulhawa's Fiction*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47–59.
- [11] Riordan, R. J. (1996). *Scriptotherapy: Therapeutic Writing as a Counseling Adjunct*. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, vol 74, no. 3, 263–269.
- [12] Said, E. W. (2000). *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press..